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10-1-1999

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Accepted version. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 57, No. 4 (Autumn 1999): 481-482.
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Review of *A Measured Pace: Toward a Philosophical Understanding of Dance*, by Francis Sparshott

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As a sequel to his first book on the philosophy of dance, *Off the Ground: First Steps to a Philosophical Consideration of the Dance* (reviewed in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 48 [1990]: 81-83), Francis Sparshott continues his explorations of dance in *A Measured Pace*. As in the first volume, he disavows any attempt to present a general theory of dance or to advance any particular philosophy of dance. His approach is grounded in a review of the "general problematics of the philosophy of art" instead of a particular set of issues arising in the dance world. Sparshott is a philosopher and not a dancer, although his extensive references and notes display firsthand observations of a broad range of dances including Western ballet, modern, and contemporary theater dance, as well as selective

dances of other cultures. His survey of philosophical literature on dance is unmatched by any other author on the subject.

While disavowing any intent to advance a particular approach to the philosophy of dance, Sparshott nevertheless supplies a minimal outline of his own premises. Philosophy, he believes, unlike science and history, inquires into meanings and the meaningful (p. 3), taking as given what science and history have disclosed. Hence the task of a philosophy of dance is to make sense of dance, or alternatively, to show that it might not make sense. The main concern of the field of aesthetics has been with dance as an art, or as one of the fine arts. And the attending aesthetic theory of dance, to the extent that it has existed, has been based largely on Western ballet or its successors in modern and contemporary theater dance. As a fine art, dance would be expected to contribute to the life of the mind. However, Sparshott cautions that the philosophy of dance embraces a broader sphere, dealing generally with the issue of how dance has meaning in the lives of humans as the perpetrators of culture in general.

Having declared his approach to the philosophy of dance, Sparshott relies upon two central concepts to guide his inquiry into the philosophy of dance: "the concept of a practice" and "dance as transformation of the person dancing." Through analyzing various attempts to define dance in his previous book, Sparshott concluded that dance is anomalous in character. As a means of coping with the anomalous nature of dance, Sparshott introduced the concept of a practice (*Off the Ground*, pp. 113-130). He relies heavily on the same notion here. Dance exists as a practice when persons knowingly engage in body movements with a recognizable form that can be identified by a concept or set of conventions in a particular cultural setting. Values expressed in rules, standards, and ideals accompany a particular dance practice, thus enabling any participant to know when a dance is taking place and at what level of success (*A Measured Pace*, pp. 301-305). This is not to say that only dance can be recognized by such enabling practices. Indeed one could identify a religious ceremony, or a funeral procession for that matter, following similar principles.

Advancing his "non-theory" of dance, Sparshott proposes that what distinguishes dance from other arts and possibly other forms of human activity as well, is its capacity for the self-transformation of the dancer. Dance, when done for its own sake, according to Sparshott, can substantially alter the dancer's being. This notion also appears in *Off the Ground* (pp. 342-344) and in *A Measured Pace* (pp. 5, 95-97), where it is linked to the Heideggerian notion of "being in the world." Here Sparshott takes his strongest stand on the philosophy of dance when he argues that the deepest meanings of dance relate to the deepest kinds of self-transformation attendant to the dancer's experience.

Intuitively, one finds sympathy for Sparshott's thesis concerning the transforming power of dance. His argument for this view is grounded in the assumption that the active use of the body in otherwise nonutility based activities is somehow contributory to the human spirit in ways that other activities, artistic or otherwise, are not. And yet such claims would surely be difficult to substantiate. Arguably, other art forms, religious practices, or even well-executed athletic performances could be so transforming as to provide significant and meaningful alterations to one's being. A related problem arises for spectators. Are only dancers privileged to access the deeper meaning of dance? If not, how is the ecstasy transferred to those who participate only through observation? And are dances where the meaning depends on visual qualities not accessible to dancers of lesser importance? But this problem arises primarily from theater dance, where the spectator's view dominates, and might not be as relevant to other dance practices.

A Measured Pace is divided into three main sections: Part I: Kinds of Dance; Part II: Dance and Related Fields; and Part III: Aspects of Dance, each with a miscellany of subdivisions. Part I addresses the problem of classification of dances, and analyzes various approaches: classification by context, by types of aesthetic theory (mimetic, expressionist, and formalist), according to formal principles of movement, anatomy, units and systems of movement, rhythm, solo and group dances, and modes of organization such as by means of narrative or music. Part II considers dance in relation to music, language, and theater. Part III analyzes such topics as dance values,

dancer and spectator, learning to dance, dance and choreography, the identity of a dance, and recording dance. The unifying principles among the various topics, if any, appear to be the previously cited concepts of "practice" and "self-transformation."

These topics, not entirely arbitrary or idiosyncratic to the interests of the author, provide such a litany of issues that the book might well be thought of as a dictionary, or perhaps an encyclopedia, of subjects for the philosophy of dance. Possibly they are intended to supply the stock repertory of problems concerning dance that Sparshott found lacking, and thus contributory to the neglect of dance by philosophers, in his *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* earlier book. Each section is laced with numerous references, drawn selectively from past and present writings on dance that might conceivably count as a contribution to, or a starting point for, a philosophy of dance. Hence scholars and students will find the book very useful as a guide to much of existing literature in the field, and as a source for problems to be explored more fully now that they have been codified. Sparshott inserts a generous supply of critical commentary, and he does not spare comments on ideas that he finds lacking. His extensive notes (81 pages) often reveal wit as well as scholarly insight—he prefers a cushion to a razor's edge—and provide some of the most interesting reading in the book.

Apart from these general features, what can *A Measured Pace* offer to the field of philosophical aesthetics? Those who prefer the safest ground, and are lacking detailed background in the history and practices of dance, might prefer to begin their excursion with the application of the familiar aesthetic categories of representation, formalism, and expression, which pertain to other arts as well as to dance. Sparshott brings his own insights to these issues, and offers suggestive directions for critical reflection and response.

For the aesthetician who is well versed in philosophy and dance, a venture into more complex problems such as the identity of a dance, or its documentation through notation or some form of visual recording will offer new challenges. Sparshott raises various issues centering on the identity of dance. For instance, how does the concept of performance enter into questions of dance identity? And, since not all

dance is art, do the provisions for dance as art differ? How do proprietary interests involving copyright issues affect identity questions? Sparshott continues the discussion of such questions, which have already appeared in the writings of Julie Van Camp and others. Maintaining the identity of a dance through time is a major problem for theater dance. How, for instance, do notated scores, videos, and film versions of dance relate to the choreographer's concept and to past performances? Sparshott's texts on these matters invite critical response, which will no doubt advance the philosophy of dance as well as expand our understanding of the arts and their special conceptual problems.

With the publication of *A Measured Pace*, Sparshott has significantly advanced the philosophical understanding of dance. His analysis is on notably more settled ground than in his previous book, *Off the Ground*, which appeared seven years before. Scholars and students will benefit from his insights and directions and find tolerable his idiosyncrasies.